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BETWEEN TOWN AND COUNTRY IN NORTHWEST TENNESSEE

The Early Life of Holland McCombs, 1901-1922.¹

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Early in this century, Americans were moving toward urban areas. Many people still lived in the countryside because the nation was significantly agricultural. In the South if a person lived near a community he could be active in country and town activities. Holland McCombs, now of San Antonio, Texas, was such an individual who grew up mainly in Martin, Tennessee, at his maternal grandmother's Woodley Farm, a place with some notably large trees.

When Holland was born in August, 1901, on a site now a part of the University of Tennessee at Martin campus, Martin hosted approximately 2,000 people. They were the economic beneficiaries of being at the junction of the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railroad and the Illinois Central Railroad. Consequently farm products could be readily shipped to market.²

McCombs' maternal ancestors were important in Martin before and during the 1900s. His grandparents, Elizabeth "Miss Lizzie" and James Evans "Squire Jim" Freeman began rearing ten children at Gardner, a community three miles west of Martin, prior to relocating at Martin in the mid-1880s. Their diversified farm was operated as a kind of extended family of whites and blacks. The Freemans were religiously, politically, and socially active at and from Woodley.³

The McCombs' relatives made an early impact too. Robert McCombs, Holland's grandfather, helped build the first saw and grist mills in Martin. Holland's grandmother, Mrs. Frances Holland McCombs was Martin's first school teacher. The town honored the family by giving the name to a street.⁴

Holland's parents, Miss Annie Freeman and Thomas William McCombs, were very different from each other. Although several McCombs and Freemans were close friends, Annie and Tom had little contact with each other until her late teens, likely because of several years difference in their ages. Annie tended more toward being proper and sedate while Tom, a railroad conductor, was a rough and ready outdoorsman. He avidly engaged in hunting, cockfighting, and gambling—at least two activities which did not endear him to the staunch Methodist Freemans. Not surprisingly then, the Freemans discouraged the courtship and eventual marriage of Annie and Tom "Possum" McCombs between 1897 and 1899. Nevertheless, the Freemans reluctantly accepted their new son-in-law.⁵

On August 5, 1901, James Holland McCombs was born in the big family house at Woodley near the present University of Tennessee at Martin Library and quadrangle. Possum was so excited about a twelve-pound son

that he shot three holes through a barbershop ceiling. The child's names were in honor of "Squire Jim" and Mrs. Frances Holland McCombs. Annie and Tom called the boy "Holland" because the Methodist Reverend James Vaughn Freeman, his uncle, was called James.⁶

Holland's early years were spent at Woodley, in Martin, or in Jackson, Tennessee. Tom's conducting took him on runs between Jackson and Mounds, Illinois. Tom decided to live in Jackson, the southern end of his route, to be with his gambling, hunting, and rooster fighting friends. Increasingly Tom was away on railroad business or wandering in the Texas area. For a while Annie and Holland lived in Jackson, but they returned to Woodley after Holland's first school year.⁷

Between 1908 and 1912 Annie, Tom, and Holland became estranged. In 1908 after a year's absence from his family, Tom arrived early one August morning. Certainly Annie and Holland greeted him happily, but the Freemans rather ostracized him. In five days he was gone, never to return to Woodley. For the next four years the wife and son seldom heard from Possum and rarely did he send them money. Tom's intention of bringing them to him did not happen either. He was secretive about his activities, even using an alias for general delivery mail in several regions of the United States and Mexico. Annie was greatly concerned about his well-being, but about 1912 she, supported by the Freemans, got a divorce through the quiet efforts of her minister brother.⁸

Through the years Annie and Holland adjusted to Tom's being gone. Clearly they loved him and could not fully comprehend his problems or actions. Holland felt sympathy toward his father for the way the Freemans treated him coldly. Holland was attracted to the winsome personality and adventuresome lifestyle of "Possum". On the other hand, Tom was not supporting his family financially or otherwise. In fact, by December, 1908, "until Possum returned or sent us some money, we (Holland and Annie) were wards of Woodley," dependent on the generosity of Miss Lizzie. Annie, defying the local custom of a married woman staying only in the home, took a job at the **Martin Mail**, a move which was initially embarrassing to Holland. At times Holland considered that Tom "had ruined her (Annie's) life." Holland was also afraid of being like his father after a school teacher characterized Holland's fighting at school as "the Possum McCombs in him." At least Holland learned to control his temper. As best as Annie and Holland could, they had to forget Possum.⁹

Through the years Holland became more closely associated with his grandmother, Miss Lizzie. She was the matriarch of Woodley and definitely the head since Squire Jim's death in 1898. She was a mixture of gentleness, generosity, and firmness. Sometimes she came across as overly firm, but Holland generally considered her fair to him. One time she caught Holland and his cousins, Dick and Elizabeth "Sis" Price smoking and wasting a box of cigars which belonged to the kids' Uncle Otis, known to the grandchildren as "Bubber." Once the kids recovered from their dizziness,

she gave them a switching. She did not tell Otis the situation. Holland observed, "A dead game sport was Miss Lizzie and it was years before Bubber knew what had happened to that . . . box of cigars." Understandably she also punished Dick and Holland for emptying a ten gallon kerosene can out on the ground. Nor could she forgive Holland and Sis Price for a biscuit fight at the table when the Methodist bishop was a guest.

At a critical time in Holland's life he came across a stray shepherd dog. Almost no one at Woodley thought he would be allowed to keep the dog. Much to Holland's joy and the surprise of adults, Miss Lizzie let him have a good hunting dog. At times Holland and Bruce, so named because Holland's class was studying Robert Bruce of Scotland, were almost inseparable companions whether hunting rabbits, going to town, or bringing in the cows.¹⁰

When Holland was eleven, he went into scouting. The experience was particularly good for him because it reduced his involvement in dice-shooting and watermelon stealing and because he became well acquainted with boys outside of Woodley and his relatives. Some boys who became youthful and lifelong friends were Paul Dodd, Frank "Hoot" Lawler, and Knox Murphy. Holland developed a lasting relationship with Assistant Scoutmaster Paul Meek, who later headed The University of Tennessee at Martin. Led by a McFerrin professor, the boys camped out often. At the Scoutmaster's insistence, Holland picked an unlikely sounding Indian name for himself—"Shellocus." Holland and a tentmate also pulled the prank of quietly removing the tent from over Meek one night.¹¹

Miss Lizzie saw to it that Holland had work responsibilities himself. He believed that his grandmother, an outstanding cook, "could provide work in just about as many varieties as she provided food." During school months he cut wood for the house and put fresh water in the room pitchers. Sometimes he helped milk the cows.

She assigned him to cut the weeds around the house and barnyard. It amazed Holland how big and tough those Jimson weeds were. With some imagination and gall he persuaded his friends that they, the Greeks (or whatever historical group was being studied at school) should chop down the Persians in battle. During the "combat," leader McCombs' spear looked much like a dried weed instead of the other soldiers' hoes. Miss Lizzie was well aware of the big battle whether other Woodley adults knew or not.

Some work was less exciting than other work. He did not like the job of wood chopping or tending hogs, and he disliked suckering the tobacco or killing tobacco or cotton worms. Still he joined in the tobacco and cotton cultivation. He was not outstanding at picking cotton either. Undoubtedly his lack of work interest partially explained his propensity to swap stories, real or imaginary, with other field hands or to find short cuts.¹²

Invariably he aspired to do work earlier than he could. He wanted to drive a wagon, but at first he had to settle for only a short trip. He got to

work some with a mule and harrow. Naturally he looked forward to the time that they would be "his" unit. He wanted to run a double shovel and pestered black hands to let him at least try occasionally. Once he could do double shoveling by himself, he definitely could impress Cousin Dick Price when he visited from Mississippi.¹³

Some work brought its own fascination or rewards. Wheat threshing and haying were particularly hot, dirty, and hard work. At times Holland and Dick would have stopped working, but they did not want to appear weak before the other hands. Besides, the workers had a standing query about who was "the monkey gonna yet" which "meant to burn out or pass out from (the) sun or work." Kids were fascinated by the operation of the hay loft needle. Certainly they wanted to operate the needle but lacked the necessary skills. At haying time workers looked forward to the big outstanding meals for which Woodley was noted. Hog killing in the late fall marked another major Woodley event. Miss Lizzie was in charge from consulting the Almanac to the cleaning up. When Holland was young, he primarily did small errands or sneaked tenderloin to drop "accidentally" into the ashes and eat "secretly" or collected the hog bladders for footballs or balloons.¹⁴

Through the years Holland found time to attend school. At first he went to the public school adjacent to Woodley. His grades were fairly good, but he considered that he learned more at Woodley. For Holland school was too confining. In the eighth grade he transferred to McFerrin School, a Methodist institution which his McCombs-Freeman relatives had attended. He did chores at McFerrin to pay part of his expenses. He engaged in a variety of school activities, including football for which he was rather light, and in the Hamilton and Jefferson (Literary) Societies. He did well in theme writing, even composing some for girls whom he liked.

By his early teens Holland alternately worked at Woodley and at the **Martin Mail**. At the **Mail** he melted printer's lead or did other odd jobs. Due to talent and his own venturesomeness he wrote some society and personal items for the Society Editor, his youngest aunt, Pauline "Nanina" Freeman House. Later he tried his hand at writing obituaries.¹⁶

A youngster could never be too busy for fun. Boys from Woodley and nearby Pumpkin Hill challenged some town boys to a corncob fight. The battle went well until Holland's side ran out of the usual light corncobs and began throwing hogpen hardened cobs. Eventually the Woodley contingent prevailed.

On Sundays, between Sunday School and worship, boys hopped on and off freights, smoked, rolled dice, or swapped stories. By worship hour they knew what sin was. Later in the day they slipped off to swim, had rock fights, or took a freight to a baseball game in Fulton, Kentucky. Some boys attended a local tennis match at which Holland accidentally shot himself in the leg, because he carelessly handled a small Colt pistol. Of course, the

boys could steal watermelons, even if from their own patch. They mistakenly thought that they had successfully stolen melons from the secure Hogan patch. Holland's punishment was the chopping of weeds. One summer Holland and his friends went on a camping and hunting trip to the Obion River bottom with almost no food but with confidence that they could kill the necessary game. Due to the boys' sometimes random and careless shooting, they ultimately had to pay for a farmer's prize cow. On another occasion Holland did himself a fun disservice by buying a highly productive Holstein through a county dairy club. Holland asserted that "she was the damndest-time-taker I've ever had any truck with."¹⁷

In 1915 Holland lost one of his mainstays. Miss Lizzie passed away in the room where several grandkids were born. Her death shocked everyone. Holland remembered that "she took care of EVERYBODY. We couldn't take care (of) her." For a time Holland was numbed and could only breathe with difficulty. Woodley was never the same without her.¹⁸

In his teens Holland became aware of social differences between country and town people. Country folks seemed backward by comparison, so he did not want to be country. Even Woodley's furniture, although quite good, was second rate in Holland's mind. Besides, girls preferred town things and boys. Holland and his rural friends sought to prevent dark or red hands and necks and attempted to soften calloused hands. The boys tried to dress and fix their hair like city youths. Holland was aware of urban youths making disparaging comments about country people. He remembered one town friend saying, "I'll bet they came from so far back in the country they use hoot owls for chickens and can look up the chimney and see the cows coming home." Maybe for those reasons city work became more appealing to Holland. Temporarily he became a soda jerk at the local drug store. At least one day he drove the local grocery delivery wagon. Those jobs made him feel more a part of the city scene. He especially aspired to be like the Union City boys who were supposedly the most sophisticated in the border area.¹⁹

In his mid-teens Holland began attending dances. His first outing was special because he got to dance with the lovely and graceful Miss Rusleen Gardner, whose parents were prominent in Martin. He was impressed that she complimented him twice on his dancing ability. By car or by train, Holland and his friends went dancing in nearby towns also. More and more frequently he and other males carried whiskey with them. For one dance Holland felt more sophisticated by wearing a \$16.00 dark blue velour hat until he found it was really "country" green.²⁰

Around this time Holland was briefly in "show business." He and friends were minstrels in a carnival to help pay for Martin's playground and zoo. Additionally he made an Egyptian costume for his shimmy and "hootchie-cootchie" dance. He adopted the stage name Salome which friends shortened to Sal. The nickname stayed with him among close friends.²¹

Local fellows also put together their own special gatherings. Holland and Paul Dodd organized and accepted full responsibility for a local dance. They and other boys held a gypsy tea at the Obion River. They went on hayrides and held watermelon parties. At the most elaborate watermelon social the idea was to impress some out-of-state female guests by stealing the melons at a well-guarded patch. To enhance the excitement Holland was to fire a shotgun and order people out of the field. Things went awry when the gun and voice belonged to a non-youth. The field was quickly cleared, but amazingly some melons were brought out for the feast.²²

The summer and fall of 1919 marked a milestone in Holland's life. In May, he finished McFerrin, and the next month he enjoyed a kind of senior trip to Mammoth Cave, with, among others, Rusleen. While friends planned for college, Holland could not go because of inadequate finances. His Uncle Otis got him a general job at the Martin Ford dealership. After a while Holland visited his cousins Dick and Sis Price in Batesville, Mississippi. There Holland became the prank "bride" of a local gullible from whom bride Holland "eloped" to bachelorhood in Martin.²³

Holland went to college a year later than his classmates. Possum sent him the basic money, and other relatives contributed also. Largely at Miss Annie's insistence he decided to study journalism at the University of Missouri. For a moment Holland could hardly believe that he was leaving his home. He bucked up and was determined to be sophisticated and knowledgeable. He got off to a good start at Mizzou, thanks to his McFerrin background and his understanding junior roommate. The second semester he pledged Kappa Sigma and his grades went down. He got into some minor problems with the Kappa Sigs, one of whom commented, "Sal, you are undoubtedly the cockiest and most incorrigible freshman this chapter has ever had."²⁴

Holland spent the summer of 1921 at Woodley and Martin. He was the white overseer of the strawberry harvest. When work backed up at the packing shed local character Mrs. Ed Lovelace goodnaturedly chided him, "Holland, you get off that horse and get to work." After that harvest Holland gained valuable journalistic experience with the Martin newspaper with stories about an alleged robbery, youths vandalizing railroad cars, a railroad crossing accident, and the women and fat men's softball game.²⁵

Thereafter Holland entered the University of Tennessee. Paul Dodd was a UT student and more importantly Rusleen was transferring there. He thought of an economics concentration for the business world or history to become a professor. Likely Holland was more accurate later in saying that he "majored in a sweetheart." When not in class or with Rusleen, he was quite active with the Kappa Sigs. His KS brothers included future U.S. Senator Estes "Keef" Kefauver and fruit-vegetable heir William "Bill" Stokely. Unfortunately for the Kappa Sigs and Holland, he was embarrassed by his last minute loss of his essential skit narration for the annual college carnival.

That disappointment paled compared to the sudden and unexpected loss of his mother in January, 1922.²⁶

Within a few months Holland reluctantly left Martin. He took with him strong family ties, continuing friendships, and a natural gregariousness. He showed a strong love of place and the past in relation to Martin and beyond. He possessed a venturesome nature which showed itself during his vagabond travels of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States Southwest and Latin America. That disposition was evident in his great variety of jobs before 1935, including sugar chemist in Cuba, dance proprietor and instructor, and riding academy operator. His love of the outdoors was apparent beyond his early years. His journalistic experience came in handy during his wanderings and eventually took him to a 35 year reporting association with **Time, Inc.**²⁷

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12. McCombs, "*Annie Goes*," pp. 47-49; McCombs, "*Woodley Days*," pp. 5-7; McCombs, "*Divorce*," p. 4; McCombs, "*As It Was*," p. 24; McCombs, "*Letters*," p. 50.
13. McCombs, "*Letters*," p. 50; and McCombs, "*Divorce*," pp. 3-7.
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21. **Ibid.**, pp. 36-37; and **Weakley County Press** and **Martin Mail**, May 13, 1921, June 3, 10 and 24, 1921, and July 1, 1921; hereafter cited as **Press and Mail**.
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